

## SOME THOUGHTS ON BEING RELIGIOUS

Yom Kippur Morning, 2015

It sometimes happens after a service that an individual or maybe a couple come up to me to say hello, not quite feeling comfortable with the traditional greeting, “Shabbat shalom.” They rarely if ever attending anything. Some years they can be seen attending a High Holy Day service – evening or morning, but never both – and some years they pass altogether, skipping even those services.

Inevitably, they feel the need to explain, “We’re not terribly religious.” They might go on to explain that they try to be ethical, or that they’re proud to be Jewish, but the bottom line is: [quote] “We’re not very religious.”

That phrase has always troubled me, on a number of levels. On the psychological level, I find it interesting that some people need to explain – no, not just explain, but to apologize – for not attending. I hope that no one comes to temple or synagogue just to please the rabbi, or to support the rabbi, though of course it’s gratifying when the pews are full and troubling when they’re empty. But in this age of pluralism when we could support any one of 10,000 different denominations, or none at all, we all recognize that we are absolutely free to make choices, and since we all do what we perceive to be in our own best interest, I don’t feel that there is any need to apologize for choosing to go elsewhere or stay at home.

But “We’re not very religious” raises a more profound question: What does “religious” mean by the person who uses it in this fashion? What does it mean to be “very” religious? What comes to mind when you hear the term? Could there be another way of looking at those who are “religious”?

I have a suspicion. My suspicion is that the term “religious” becomes a convenient substitute for our participation in the life of the synagogue, or our personal observance of the customs of Judaism. My further suspicion is that for some of us “very religious” is the same thing as being Orthodox: An Orthodox Jew is very religious because he or she observes the mitzvot, keeps kosher, keeps Shabbat, etc. “Very religious” becomes the very antithesis of “Very Reform” which some use to mean that they might attend an occasional service, but don’t actually do much by way of Jewish practice.

But if “very religious” means tending towards Orthodoxy, or at least a highly observant life-style with lots of Jewish content, then what do we do with the Jew

who rigorously observes Shabbat and kashrut, holidays and life cycle observances, but is a white-collar criminal whose business practices are shameful or worse? Can one be an observant Jew and not be “very religious”? I submit that Yes, one cannot be “very religious” unless one lives by a strong moral compass and tries to improve the world and the lot of those who are needy. The Orthodox (or shall we say “observant”) Jew who is unscrupulous in his business practices and provides nothing to charity is not very religious, or even religious at all, in my point of view, no matter how punctilious his observance of Jewish ritual might be.

If this is true, then we have to examine the corollary. The corollary is the Jewish person who is non-observant of ritual, but works for justice and peace, has a strong moral compass, supports those who are less fortunate, and doesn’t need a personally ostentatious life-style. This person is closer to the term “very religious,” where the term “religious” refers not to ritual, but to the character of the person.

That great 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher and theologian, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, speaks of the religious person as having the capacity for what he calls “radical amazement.” Though we in Reform Judaism don’t often read Heschel, I find the notion of “radical amazement” to be helpful and insightful.

We moderns fall into a trap, writes Heschel in his classic, *God in Search of Man*, of thinking that everything can be explained, that all enigmas, both scientific and social, can be rationalized, that all enigmas can be solved. Being religious, for Heschel, is not blindly following codes of law and ritual, but of standing in awe before the wonder of God’s creation – and letting that sense of awe wash over us without trying to describe it or rationalize it or explain it. It just *is*.

Being religious, therefore, doesn’t have to take place in a temple or synagogue. Scientists look deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the universe, always unfolding new levels of understanding – I heard yesterday of a scientist who found a way to change a skin cell into a nerve cell; water has just been discovered on Mars, and new elements are being discovered by the next generation particle accelerator – yet the true scientist can still only stand in awe before the ultimate mystery of Creation. This capacity to sense (where even the very word “sense” is inadequate) something ever larger than anything we can explain or understand, is the ultimate stance of the man or woman we can call “religious.”

Heschel writes that the religious attitude acknowledges that there are natural laws that regulate the course of natural processes; he is aware of the regularity and

pattern of things. However, such knowledge fails to reduce his sense of perpetual surprise at the fact that there are facts at all. “Wonder,” he writes, “is the prelude to knowledge; it ceases, once the cause of a phenomenon is explained.”

Let me share with you just a bit more of Heschel, whose writings are about the most profound I have come across:

“*Radical amazement* has a wider scope than any other act of man. While any act of perception or cognition has as its object a selected segment of reality, radical amazement refers to all of reality; not only to what we see, but also to the very act of seeing as well as to our own selves, to the selves that see and are amazed at their ability to see. Even the very act of thinking baffles our thinking, just as every intelligible fact is, by virtue of its being a fact, drunk with baffling aloofness. What formula could explain and solve the enigma of the very fact of thinking?”

As I reflect on this passage, it seems to me to teach that the goal of the religious person is to gain that outlook on life which *always* looks on the world with radical amazement. If we were to approach everything in life with such reverence and (literally) awe, how could there be evil?

Heschel is not the only writer who thinks along these lines. One thinks of Martin Buber, whose classic *I And Thou* posits that God is found in relationships – in the true and deep mutuality of profound relationships that move beyond the world of IT into sacred, transcendent relationships wherein we can sense God’s presence.

In our rational, scientifically explained world we find it difficult to have I-Thou relationships, even with those whom we love the most. To be “very religious” in the sense not just of being ethical and moral, but of feeling awe at the profound unity of Creation and our place within it – is not something most of us are comfortable with. But I want to share with you that sometimes, those who apologize for not being “religious” are often the most religious of all.

The prophet Isaiah understood this. In a reading we use every year on Yom Kippur, he makes this distinction: “Is this the fast I look for? A day of self-affliction? Bowing your head like a reed, and covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord? Is not *this* the fast I look for: to unlock the shackles of injustice, to undo the fetters of bondage, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor unto your house?”

Isaiah understood that mere ritual is meaningless without a true sense of what it means to be *religious*.

Now it might seem, after all this, that the best way to be religious is to stay home from synagogue, ignore all of our traditions and practices, and simply look out the window and be amazed at how wonderful the world seems to be. And for some people this might suffice, though I doubt it would lead to a satisfying life.

What Heschel and others have found is that this capacity to be religious, to have within oneself that sense of awe – we might use the term “prayer” for that sense of awe – is most conducive to being nurtured within a community such as ours. Reading the prayers on the page might be for some an intellectual exercise, but the experience of worshipping together, reciting ancient texts to awe-inspiring music, can lead to an emotional, psychic response that goes far beyond anything we can analyze. I suspect, indeed, that this is what brings us back here week after week. We who have within us the capacity to be touched by our tradition, and moved by the grandeur of Creation, are truly religious, and their prayers of the heart, even if inarticulate, will be answered.